

03/02/21 Tuesday

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Israeli Defense Minister to Develop 'Special Security Arrangement' with Gulf States - Report by [Mary F.](#)

Israeli President Reuven Rivlin on Monday received the first-ever ambassador to Israel, Mohamed Mahmoud Al Khajah, from the UAE, following the agreement that the countries made last year to normalize relations.

On Tuesday, Israel's Defense Minister Benny Gantz, while on a visit to an Israel-Gaza border crossing, revealed that Israel plans to develop a "special security arrangement" with new Gulf Arab allies, [Reuters reported](#).

"I don't think it's going to be a defense pact but we are going to develop defense relations with every country that we have relations with," Gantz told Reuters.

"We have this process of setting up [a] special security arrangement, and within this arrangement we can continue and develop our relations," Gantz added, although he declined to provide additional details on what such an arrangement could include.

Gantz also noted that Israel had no opposition to former US president [Donald Trump's deal to sell](#) 50 Lockheed Martin F-35 stealth jets to the UAE during his last days in office. The deal is currently being examined by US President Joe Biden, [Reuters reported](#) last month.

UAE envoy Mohamed Mahmoud Al Khajah arrived in Israel on Monday, where he met with Israeli President Reuven Rivlin during a ceremony in Jerusalem. The UAE's first ambassador to Israel also met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday to discuss regional and bilateral projects:

"We're changing the Middle East. We're changing the world," Netanyahu told Al Khajah during the meeting, [the National News reported](#).

Last week, Al Khaja held talks with Israel's temporary ambassador in the UAE, Eitan Na'eh, who is stationed in Abu Dhabi, with the parties having discussed means of developing bilateral relations.

In addition to the UAE, other majority-Muslim countries, including Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan also [normalized relations](#) with the Jewish state last year. The Abraham Accords establishing diplomatic relations between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain and Israel were signed in Washington last September. Morocco and Sudan later followed suit, inking similar agreements with Israel.

The rapprochement [met harsh criticism](#) in Palestine.

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Ilhan Omar Introduces Bill to Sanction Saudi Crown Prince Over Khashoggi Killing  
by [Mary F.](#)

The US President Joe Biden administration last week imposed dozens of sanctions on Saudi officials and individuals believed to be connected to the 2018 killing of Jamal Khashoggi, a prominent Saudi journalist.

US Representative Ilhan Omar (D- MN) on Tuesday introduced legislation to sanction Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman for his role in the gruesome killing of Jamal Khashoggi, after US intelligence assessed that the crown prince approved an operation to “capture or kill” the Washington Post columnist.

“If the United States of America truly supports freedom of expression, democracy and human rights, there is no reason not to sanction Mohammed bin Salman — a man our own intelligence found to have approved the murder of US resident and Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi,” Omar said in a Tuesday statement obtained by [The Hill](#), also noting that sanctioning the crown prince would be a “test of our humanity.”

“Every minute the Crown Prince escapes punishment is a moment where US interests, human rights, and the lives of Saudi dissenters are at risk,” she continued.

If approved, the legislation, called the Mohammed bin Salman Must be Sanctioned (MBS MBS) Act, would block all the crown prince’s transactions linked to the United States. In addition, it would ban the crown prince for entering the country.

“We base this assessment on the crown prince’s control of decision making in the Kingdom, the direct involvement of a key adviser and members of Mohammed bin Salman’s protective detail in the operation, and the crown prince’s support for using violent measures to silence dissidents abroad, including Khashoggi,” reads the [report](#) from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (DNI).

Despite the report’s findings, the Biden administration exempted the crown prince from punitive measures and instead imposed visa restrictions on 79 people believed to be connected with Khashoggi’s deaths, as well as sanctions on a former intelligence official and the crown prince’s personal security detail.

On Monday, White House press secretary Jen Psaki defended Biden’s decision not to impose sanctions on the crown prince noting that “historically, the United States, through Democratic and Republican presidents, has not typically sanctioned government leaders of countries where we [have diplomatic relations](#).”

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‘Completely Hispanic State’: US Democrats Introduce Plan for Puerto Rico Statehood  
by [Mary F.](#)

Puerto Rico, located in the northeast Caribbean Sea, is considered an unincorporated territory of the United States. The island of Puerto Rico, known for its mountains, waterfalls and the El Yunque tropical rainforest, is thus neither a US state nor a sovereign nation.



On Tuesday, Democratic Sen. Martin Heinrich (N.M.) and Rep. Darren Soto (Fla.) announced that they would be introducing legislation to make Puerto Rico the 51st US state, [The Hill reported](#). The new proposal to make Puerto Rico a US state also has the support of the resident commissioner of Puerto Rico, Del. Jenniffer González-Colón (R).

The bill would establish a process to make Puerto Rico a US state if such a plan is ratified by Puerto Rican voters in a referendum.

In November 2020, more than 52% of Puerto Ricans voted in favor of statehood. The [vote](#) came three years after Hurricane Maria devastated the island, which helped to shed light on Puerto Rico's lack of resources as an unincorporated territory to effectively combat poverty.

In a Tuesday statement, Heinrich noted that her own state's journey to statehood was a decades-long process.

"My home state of New Mexico had a similar struggle to achieve statehood. It took 50 New Mexico statehood bills and 64 years before we were finally admitted to the United States," Heinrich explained.

Last month, Puerto Rico Gov. Pedro Pierluisi declared that Congress was "morally obligated" to respond to the island's referendum vote on statehood.

"The US could be expanding by admitting Puerto Rico into the union," Pierluisi told [Axios](#). "It would be telling the world that it is embracing diversity because this would be a truly, completely Hispanic state."

"We need a game changer in Puerto Rico. And one game changer would be that we get equal treatment in key federal programs," Pierluisi also added, noting that programs like Medicaid and the Earned Income Tax Credit are not available to Puerto Ricans.

While those against statehood argue that such a move could eradicate Puerto Rico's self-determination and national identity, statehood proponents argue that the federal government doesn't fund programs to promote economic development in the territory.

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FBI Pushing Tech Firms to Write Own Backdoors Into Encrypted Messaging Apps, Director Tells Congress  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The US has on spurious grounds banned Chinese tech firms for ostensibly placing surveillance backdoors into their technology on behalf of the Chinese government. However, the head of the US' Federal Bureau of Investigation has revealed the law enforcement agency is pressuring tech firms to do just that.

During testimony to a US Senate panel on Tuesday, FBI Director Christopher Wray said the bureau was working with tech giants and social media companies to monitor and crack down on "extremist" coordination in the wake of the January 6 attack on the US Capitol by supporters of former US President Donald Trump.

"Terrorism moves at the speed of social media," [Wray told the Senate](#) Judiciary Committee, noting social media has become a "major factor" and catalyst for the efficient dissemination of extremist ideas in a decentralized way.

The federal police chief's [Tuesday testimony](#) was his first appearance on Capitol Hill since the events of January 6, when Trump supporters stormed the national legislature and temporarily dispersed Congress in an attempt to reverse the outcome of the November 2020 election, which Trump lost. Four rioters and one Capitol Police officer died in the incident, which ultimately failed at its goal.

In the two months since the assault, the FBI has arrested more than 270 suspects, many on charges that include conspiracy and sedition. However, he noted on Tuesday that despite use of the term and enthusiasm for making it an official crime by many lawmakers, there is [no specific charge for](#) "domestic terrorism." However, Wray did describe some of the insurrectionists as coming to Washington, DC, with "plans and intentions to engage in ... domestic terrorism."

The FBI chief indicated he would "welcome more tools in the toolbox" if lawmakers created such a charge, but noted that so far, his agents have been able to adequately charge suspects using the "tools they have." He further indicated the bureau [needs to expand](#) to meet the challenge posed by [both left-wing](#) and right-wing "extremists," noting a number of investigations are still underway dating to the nationwide protests against police brutality and white supremacy in the middle of 2020. He, along with many of the senators on the committee, readily equated anti-racist "anarchists" from those protests with the right-wing militia members who spearheaded the Capitol assault last month.

In the aftermath of the attack, social media giants clamped down on sympathetic posts and accounts, [with Twitter alone](#) banning 70,000 accounts that promoted the Qanon conspiracy theory that heavily underpinned much of the pro-Trump protests. Trump's account was also suspended, and [similar purges swept](#) across YouTube, Facebook, and other social media platforms, while Parler, the messaging platform used by many of the perpetrators of the Capitol assault to coordinate their plans, [was temporarily completely](#) shut down.

However, it wasn't just Trump supporters who [found themselves silenced](#) or punished by the tech giants, as a number of left-wing and independent pages and sites also saw their accounts temporarily shuttered or pages demonetized.

The FBI's Problem With Social Media Encryption

"We try to work with social media companies to get them to more aggressively use their terms" of service to 'police their own platforms,'" Wray told lawmakers.

Noting the incredible volume of violent rhetoric that appears all across social media, the FBI director said social media companies "play a huge role" in helping the Bureau identify valid threats that "crossed the line" from "aspirational" to "intentional," helping them to separate wheat from chaff.

However, the partnership with social media goes further. Wray said that the FBI was "not trying to get backdoors" into devices or platforms, but noted that the Bureau has pressured tech firms to put such backdoors into apps, particularly ones that automatically encrypt data, such as Telegram or Signal, to "build in a way to have legal access when confronted with the proper legal authority so that they can get access to information and provide it in response to a warrant or court order."



"This is a subject that I think the American people need to understand because the decisions that affect the life and blood of Americans all over this country, which normally are made by our elected representatives, are, in effect, getting made in corporate offices in big technology companies," Wray said.

Wray's comments effectively mirror those by researchers such as Alex Stamos, the former chief security officer at Facebook who is presently director of the Stanford Internet Observatory, a group [that partners closely](#) with the US government to crack down on alternate narratives, which they call "disinformation."

"The ability to do academic research on what's happening online has never been worse," [Stamos told Reuters](#) in a July 2019 interview. "What you get is everything encrypted and everything locked up and not available to researchers."

Stamos has in turn pressured tech giants to hand over user data for "academic" purposes, including backdoor access to user and ad data via API gateways, turning the SIO into [what Wired called](#) "his data clearinghouse."

While multiple lawmakers asked Wray about the FBI's use of metadata or geolocation data from suspects' phones or data from their banks on purchases made in DC, Wray refused to confirm or deny the use of those tools in the January 6 investigation, only noting they are "tools in the toolbox" that he "would not be surprised to learn" were being used in certain cases. However, he specifically denied the use of Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) court warrants or national security letters.

#### Norfolk FBI Report

A major subject of this signal-to-noise ratio concern has been the report by the FBI's field office in Norfolk, Virginia, that identified the severe nature of the threat posed by some of the people going to Trump's "Stop the Steal" rally on January 6 several days beforehand.

Last month, Steven Sund, who was serving as the chief of US Capitol Police during the attack, but resigned afterward, [told lawmakers that](#) he did not get the Norfolk report before January 6.

The evidence might have been enough to overcome the intransigence from the Senate and House sergeants-at-arms and from the Pentagon in the face of repeated requests for National Guard support in the days leading up to January 6, as well as during the attack itself. As [Sputnik has reported](#), the "optics" of having US troops fighting US citizens in the shadow of the national legislature was repeatedly cited as justification for their hesitation.

Wray told lawmakers Tuesday that the Norfolk report, which warned people going to Washington intended to wage "war," was viewed as "unverified information" at the time and not immediately obviously accurate. He noted how the agency struggles to separate signal from noise, as well as telling which violent rhetoric online is "aspirational" versus "intentional."

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Biden Says US to Have Enough COVID-19 Vaccines for Every American Adult by End of May by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Despite Russia's Sputnik V vaccine being cheaper and logically easier to distribute than the Pfizer or Moderna COVID-19 vaccines that require ultra-cold storage, Washington has so far refused to use the pioneering inoculation.

US President Joe Biden announced Tuesday he was invoking the Defense Production Act to direct production of Johnson & Johnson's single-shot COVID-19 vaccine, ensuring the US will have a shot for every American adult by the end of May - two months ahead of the previous schedule.

"Johnson & Johnson's vaccine-manufacturing facilities will now begin to operate 24/7," Biden said Tuesday. The pharmaceutical giant's vaccine was recently granted [emergency use authorization](#) by the US Food and Drug Administration and more than 2.8 million doses are expected to begin shipping later this week.

According to US census data, there are roughly 255 million Americans over the age of 18, with another roughly 73 million minors. While the effects of [COVID-19 on youth](#) or their possibility of transmission remain unclear, there is at least partial evidence that children receive milder symptoms of infection than adults.

Biden further said he wanted every educator and school official to receive at least one COVID-19 shot by the end of March amid plans by many school districts to [at least partially reopen](#).

In addition, Biden said Johnson & Johnson would get help producing its vaccine from Merck, a pharmaceutical competitor who will provide much-needed manufacturing capacity. The company had promised to deliver 100 million doses by the end of June.

The US also has two other vaccines already in use: one by Moderna and another by Pfizer-BioNTech. White House coronavirus coordinator Jeff Zients [said earlier Tuesday](#) that using those two vaccines, states should be able to vaccinate between 16 and 17 million people per week in March, and between 17 and 18 million per week in April. On top of that, J&J's vaccine will climb to between 4 and 6 million weekly doses by the end of March and 5 to 6 million weekly doses through April.

However, the J&J vaccine doesn't seem to be quite as effective at preventing COVID-19 as the others. [Stat News reported](#) that just 66% of those vaccinated with the J&J shot were prevented from getting the virus, as compared to 90% of those using Moderna's or Pfizer's vaccines.

However, J&J's shot was found 85% effective against severe forms of the disease, resulting in a lower mortality rate during the 28-day period it takes for the vaccine to become fully effective.

[According to data](#) from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 102 million vaccine doses have been delivered as of Tuesday but just 78.6 million have been administered - all of them to adults, amounting to 20.3% of the adult population. New COVID-19 infections and deaths have also declined dramatically in the last two months, with just over 50,000 new cases reported on Monday and 1,283 people dying of COVID-19 that day. More than 515,000 Americans have died of COVID-19 in total.

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Beijing Downplays Possibility of Formal Alliance With Moscow, Highlights 'Non-Alignment' Principles  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Gone are the days of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance, but that hasn't prevented the two nations from building significant military, political and economic ties in recent decades in the many fields where their interests coincide.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry dispelled rumors Beijing and Moscow are planning a formal alliance to counteract the US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or the Indo-Pacific "Quad" group, but noted the two nations often have interests that coincide.

"China-Russia military relations are ... an important supporting force in strategic cooperation between the two countries," the ministry said in a Monday statement quoted by the [South China Morning Post](#). "The two sides adhere to the principle of non-alignment, non-confrontation and non-targeting of third countries, which differs completely from the military alliance between some countries."

Instead, the two nations maintain what they call a "comprehensive strategic partnership," which has focused on economic integration and "win-win cooperation," as Chinese President Xi Jinping [put it in 2019](#) when he urged Russian President Vladimir Putin to upgrade their relations. The two nations have also participated in many joint military drills in recent years, with Russia inviting Chinese forces to participate in the [Kavkaz 2020 war games](#) and the huge [Vostok 2018 drills](#), both of which also featured other nations as well.

Asked about the possibility of an alliance in October, [Putin told reporters](#), "we don't need it, but, theoretically, it's quite possible to imagine it."

"The time will show how it will develop," he said of continuing Sino-Russian military cooperation and weapons sales, adding that "we won't exclude it."

Such a formal alliance existed in the decade after the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in the Chinese civil war, when the People's Republic of China and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics stood together as two socialist superpowers. However, that pact fell apart in the 1960s amid a series of internal debates over leadership of the world communist movement, the correct path forward for socialist development, and other issues such as border disputes.

An important factor in the Sino-Soviet split was the influence of the United States, which helped to divide the two by claiming to provide a counterpoint to Soviet influence for China. While tensions between Beijing and Washington have cooled considerably in recent years, as those between Beijing and Moscow have warmed once more, the [Defense Ministry also said](#) it hopes that bilateral ties between the US and Chinese militaries will continue to grow.

However, the ministry also responded to claims by the US in particular that China poses a threat to its neighbors.

"China's socialist nature, its strategic choice to take the road of peaceful development and independent foreign policy of peace, as well as the traditional Chinese culture advocating 'harmony,' determine that China unswervingly pursues a defense policy that is [defensive in nature](#)," the ministry said in a [separate news release](#) on Monday.

"China unswervingly pursues a defensive national defense policy. It is a distinctive feature of China's national defense in the new era that China will never seek hegemony, expansion or spheres of influence ... The building and development of China's national defense and armed

forces is entirely driven by the need to safeguard China's national sovereignty, security and development interests, not targeting any country or not posing threat to any country," the ministry added.

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US Air Force Needs to Reverse-Engineer Parts for Aging Stealth Bomber  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The most recent estimate for the Northrop Grumman B-21 Raider's first flight is in mid-2022, with the first two aircraft under construction. The Raider is due to replace the B-2 Spirit, the first and only operational stealth bomber.

The US Air Force is short on parts for its B-2 Spirit stealth bombers, and needs a capable engineering contractor to reverse engineer a key part in its cooling system. It's a humorous request to make, given how highly secretive the aircraft's design is.

A [solicitation notice posted](#) on the beta.SAM.gov US government contracting site last week says the US Air Force needs someone to "reverse engineer" the core of one of the B-2's cooling systems, as well as figure out how to remove the defective cores and install the new ones. The posting says the engineers will be provided with two examples of the pieces needed.

It's unclear exactly why this process is required. As [The War Zone notes](#), it's possible that due to the B-2's highly secretive nature, the original plans or tools for producing the part in question have been destroyed; another possibility is that they were produced by a firm that no longer exists.

Northrop built just 21 of the advanced aircraft, the last of which entered service in 2000, having originally planned to buy 132 of them before the end of the Cold War. They are expected to [continue in service](#) until the 2030s, when they will be replaced by the [B-21 Raider](#), another stealth bomber of remarkably similar configuration.

This isn't the first time the US military has faced such a problem: when the Iowa-class battleships were being [removed from mothball](#) and modernized in the 1980s to compete with the Soviet Union's Kirov-class cruisers, only a handful of people were still around from when they had last been used in the 1950s and 60s, much less from their construction in the 1940s, resulting in a costly and time-consuming retraining process for their crews.

In addition, the Air Force has also [reverse-engineered numerous](#) parts of the aging B-52 Stratofortress bomber, the War Zone noted. The huge aircraft are more than half-a-century old and expected to continue flying for decades to come.

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'Act Rationally': Iran Warns Looming IAEA Resolution Will Have 'Adverse Effects' on Diplomacy  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)



Earlier, Iran rejected an invitation from global partners of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to discuss the Middle Eastern country's potential return to the negotiating table. Iran has repeatedly indicated it will not negotiate as long as US sanctions remain in place, a stance firmly opposed by Washington officials.

Iran warned on Monday that a looming resolution expected to be put forward later this week by the International Atomic Energy Agency's board of governors will effectively undermine ongoing diplomatic efforts between the two parties.

Citing a document released by the Iranian mission in Vienna, the [AFP reported](#) that the looming resolution would specifically sabotage a three-month agreement recently worked out between the UN nuclear watchdog and Iranian officials.

"I have to give this warning, that actions against our expectations will have adverse effects on diplomatic processes, and can quickly close the windows of opportunity," Ali Rabiei, a spokesperson for the Iranian government, told reporters on Tuesday.

He added that Iran expects "all parties to act rationally and prudently, and to know the value of fleeting moments."

"We are still committed to diplomacy," the spokesperson underscored.

The potentially-compromised IAEA agreement allows for Iranian officials to store data from cameras on Iran's nuclear program for a period of three months, instead of being handed over directly to the watchdog. However, if stiff sanctions placed against Iran are not lifted by the end of the three months, Tehran will be cleared to erase the data.

Rabiei remarked to the press that the temporary agreement highlighted Iran's willingness to show "goodwill," but that the ball is now effectively in the court of other parties. He noted that the UK, France, Germany, and other European parties of the 2015 deal need to match Tehran's efforts.

Iran's deal with the IAEA came about after Tehran passed legislation last year that called for halting some JCPOA commitments, such as inspections, in the event the incoming Biden administration either failed to ease US-imposed sanctions, or if European partners did not offer their assistance in the matter.

The December 2020 legislation required the US to lift sanctions by [February 21](#); however, if Washington failed to meet the deadline, it would limit the IAEA's access to Iranian nuclear sites. With the US not budging on the matter, the restrictions took effect on February 23.

Relations between Iran and the US have remained heightened since Washington's [2018 withdrawal](#) from the JCPOA, over allegations made by the Trump administration that Tehran had violated the agreement. The withdrawal prompted a slew of sanctions previously lifted to be reimposed, and was followed by a so-called "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran. At present, both the US and Iran have repeatedly called on one another to make the first move, to no avail.

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Trump May 'Pretend' to Run in 2024 Race to Cash In on Election Fundraising, Says Niece

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Mary Trump, niece of former US President Donald Trump, made headlines last year after she published a tell-all book on her uncle that dished on a variety of family topics, including when the one-time commander-in-chief allegedly made inappropriate remarks when she was wearing a bathing suit.

Mary Trump recently remarked that the former president may “pretend” to run in the 2024 presidential election in order to cash in on his bid, since his loss to US President Joe Biden turned out to be quite lucrative.

In a [Monday interview](#) with MSNBC’s Mehdi Hasan, Trump indicated that her uncle would likely continue to tease his presidential bid because he had raised large sums of money from devoted supporters, even after he lost the highly contested election.

“I think he’s going to pretend [to run], for sure,” she told Hasan. “Think about how much money he’s made off the big lie the last few months. He’s made more money since President Biden won the election than I think he has in his entire life.”

“I don’t think he’s going to let that grift go quite so soon,” Trump remarked.

[An investigation](#) conducted by The New York Times after the election was called for Biden reveals that the former president managed to raise roughly \$170 million by the end of November 2020. Of the funds, the majority was reportedly collected in the first week after Election Day. However, the Times’ probe also determined that while fundraiser efforts stated collections would go to a so-called “Election Defense Fund,” it was later revealed that 75% of the donations were actually being transferred to another account that would be used to fund the New York native’s future political endeavors.

Similar findings were also [reported](#) by The Washington Post, which indicated at the time that Trump’s post-election fundraising efforts saw upwards of \$170 million.

Trump further told Hasan that her uncle would more than likely not become the Republican nominee over fears that he could lose his second bid to regain the White House. “There’s no way that he is going to put himself in the position of losing again,” she said.

The latest commentary came a day after the former president hinted at tossing his name into the 2024 bid during a speech at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference on Sunday.

Marking his first [public remarks](#) since leaving the White House, the former commander-in-chief stated that “it is far from being over,” and that he “may even decide to beat them for a third time.” The speech saw the current Florida resident reiterate claims that he “won” the 2020 election, which was called for Biden when he managed to win 306 electoral votes.

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‘Truly Disgusting’: Fox News Staffers Left Stunned as Kayleigh McEnany Joins Network  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)



Kayleigh McEnany was the last White House press secretary to serve under former US President Donald Trump, closing shut a revolving door of Trump-era insiders who took up the post during the administration's four years. Prior to McEnany, the position was filled by Sean Spicer, Sarah Huckabee Sanders and Stephanie Grisham.

The Fox News network officially announced on Tuesday that former White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany would be joining its roster of contributors, a move that wasn't exactly warmly accepted by staffers.

McEnany's addition to the list of contributors was announced by Fox News anchor Harris Faulker, who in turn provided network viewers with an [exclusive interview](#) with the former press secretary.

The interview itself saw McEnany discuss a variety of topics, ranging from the events of the Capitol riot, Trump's address at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference and the difference in how White House reporters are treating current Press Secretary Jen Psaki, among other topics.

However, despite the fresh line-up change at the network, it appears as though not everyone is enjoying the new hire, especially newsroom staffers.

In statement given to The Daily Beast, a Fox News insider [remarked](#) that it was "truly disgusting they fired hard-working journalists who did care about facts and news reporting only to turn around and hire a mini Goebbels whose incessant lies from the White House helped incite an insurrection on our democracy that got five people killed."

A current staffer told the outlet that while it was "upsetting" that McEnany was hired, it only made sense that the former Trump administration official would be coming onboard since "Sarah Sanders just left to run for governor of Arkansas and our audience loves Kayleigh." Other staffers who anonymously spoke out against the new hire made similar remarks, with one newsroom employee stating that McEnany was only employed by the network because of "name recognition, notoriety, [and] an obvious willingness to say anything her employer desires."

"The viewers are morons," the individual underscored.

Another staffer explained that the decision by the Fox network to hire McEnany was likely rooted in the company's desire to stop losing viewers it had gained through its coverage of the Trump administration.

"They are grasping at straws on how to keep the viewership they built and fueled over the last four plus years with Trump at the forefront," the employee told The Daily Beast. "It has become about keeping viewers and they will do anything to do that, including blatantly lying and selling their souls and integrity to the devil."

McEnany, who happened to get her start on television through CNN, began her time as White House press secretary in April 2020 with a promise that she would by no means lie to the American public. However, she soon enough became a [fact-checker's delight](#).

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Researchers Use X-Ray Tech to Unravel Centuries-Old Secrets Hidden in Locked Letters

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Letterlocking is considered a centuries-old technique in which an individual intricately folds a piece of correspondence in order to safeguard the contents from any eagle-eyed snooper. The practice was even tapped by Mary, Queen of Scots, who protected the contents of an 1587 letter to her brother-in-law with a so-called "butterfly lock" seal.

A team of scientists and researchers associated with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology recently revealed that they were able to virtually disclose the contents of locked letters by using X-ray machines, as opposed to cutting the letters apart and destroying historical artifacts.

Published in the journal [Nature Communications](#), the findings detailed that the group of researchers was able to decode the contents of a letter by first scanning it with an advanced X-ray microtomography scanner. With the scan offering up a three-dimensional image, officials then used computer analysis to piece together the pieces of virtual parchment.

"The scanning technology is similar to medical CT scanners, but using much more intense X-rays which allow us to see the minute traces of metal in the ink used to write these letters," David Mills, of Queen Mary University of London, explained in a [statement](#) accompanying a release. "The rest of the team were then able to take our scan images and turn them into letters they could open virtually and read for the first time in over 300 years."

"We've been able to use our scanners to X-ray history," Mills added.

In total, the team was able to virtually pry apart four undelivered letters dated from 1680 and 1706 that had been pulled from a postal truck kept at The Hague. The historical treasure trove is known as the Brienne Collection and contains 577 locked letters.

Letters were placed inside the wooden truck, which houses a total of 3,148 items, whenever any piece of correspondence was unable to be delivered to its intended address. The idea was to keep the letter inside the box with the hope that it would eventually be retrieved.

The trunk belonged to one of the most active postmaster and postmistress of the day, Simon and Marie de Brienne, a couple at the heart of European communication networks. The chest contains an extraordinary archive: 2600 "locked" letters sent from all over Europe to this axis of communication, none of which was never delivered. Sealed letterpackets from this trunk were scanned by X-ray microtomography and "virtually unfolded" to reveal their contents for the first time in centuries.

One of the letters translated by the team was dated July 31, 1697, and was sent from Lille, France by a man named Jacques Sennacque to his cousin Pierre Le Pers, who was working as a merchant in The Hague. After processing the letter, officials determined that Sennacque had requested a copy of a death certificate and asked for "news of your health."

Having reviewed hundreds of thousands of letters, the team of researchers were also able to pinpoint 12 different formats of letterlocking, some of which turned out to be far more complex than others.

Other sources for further investigation include the hundreds of undelivered letters included in the [Prize Papers](#) archive, a collection of mail and other material that were confiscated from enemy ships by Britain from the 17th and 19th centuries.



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Reality Confirmed - Political Cartoon

In the wake of the deadly Capitol riot, it was no secret that supporters of former US President Donald Trump stormed the federal building in an effort to halt the certification of the US election results. However, despite that knowledge, conspiracy theories emerged detailing that “fake” Trump supporters took part in the siege.

FBI Director Christopher Wray confirmed on Tuesday for a second time that his agency has found “[no evidence](#)” to support claims that Antifa participated in the insurrection, or that individuals purposely posed as Trump supporters before engaging in violent behavior.

The hearing also saw the director note the FBI is presently investigating some 2,000 domestic terrorism cases, a massive spike as investigators continue to probe threats linked to the insurrection.

Additionally, Wray told lawmakers during the Capitol Hill hearing that more than 270 people have been hit with riot-related charges, and that the bureau has received about 300,000 tips linked to the January 6 events.

A [Tuesday report](#) published by George Washington University’s Program on Extremism found that 33 individuals who were charged for taking part in the riot had belonged to right-wing militia groups, whereas another 82 made up part of “organized clusters” of friends and associates.

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'Act of Love': Vatican Defends Pope Francis' Decision to Travel to Iraq Amid COVID Case Surge

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Pope Francis expressed in January that he was unsure “if the trip to Iraq can take place” because “life has changed” amid the pandemic. While Iraq has received its first shipment of novel coronavirus vaccines, there have been at least 13,428 COVID-19 deaths, and over 700,000 people in the country have tested positive for the contagious disease.

Vatican spokesperson Matteo Bruni informed reporters Tuesday that a number of health precautions have been taken ahead of Pope Francis' controversial March 5-8 trip to Iraq, the birthplace of Abraham.

Bruni highlighted that 84-year-old religious leader, his 20-person entourage and more than 70 journalists have been fully inoculated for added protection against novel coronavirus symptoms. Furthermore, events have been organized to have limited participation and space for social-distancing. There will also be enforcement of a mask mandate in attendance and Pope Francis will be transported via covered car.

At the same, the Vatican has planned to hold a 10,000-person mass in an Erbil stadium.

"An entire community and an entire country will be able to follow this journey through the media and know that the pope is there for them, bringing a message that it is possible to hope even in situations that are most complicated," he said, as reported by the [Associated Press](#).

The spokesperson also told reporters that it was "an urgency" to travel to the Middle East country, and officials decided against postponing the trip because it is "the first possible moment for a journey like this."

The Vatican's message of urgency comes alongside the 84-year-old religious leader's latest warnings of a Biblical flood. Earlier [this week](#), the head of the Roman Catholic Church warned humanity may soon be met with a "great flood" triggered by climate change.

"Perhaps the best way to interpret this journey is as an act of love for this land, for its people and for its Christians," Bruni told reporters. "Every act of love can be interpreted as extreme, but as an extreme confirmation to be loved and confirmed in that love."

As for event preparation in Iraq, proper health care protocols are "critical but can be managed," according to an Iraqi government official [who spoke](#) with the AP.

Health Experts Fear Pope Francis Visit May Lead to 'Super-Spreader' Events

Many infectious disease professionals worldwide have spoken out against the trip, arguing the series of religious events could go haywire as Christians in Iraq attempt to witness the first-ever visit to the birthplace of Abraham by a pope.

"I just don't think it's a good idea," Dr. Navid Madani, a virologist and director of Harvard Medical School's Center for Science Health Education in the Middle East and North Africa, told the outlet.

The expert warned that local Iraqis may inadvertently break COVID-19 control measures in their attempt to welcome the religious leader.

The trip will come alongside the beginning of Iraq's COVID-19 [vaccination program](#) - meaning most individuals in the country will not be fully inoculated.

"This could potentially lead to unsafe or super-spreading risks," Madani warned.

Dr. Bharat Pankhania, an infectious disease control expert with the University of Exeter College of Medicine, expressed similar sentiments, stating that, during a pandemic, "the less interactions with fellow human beings, the better."

While COVID-19 cases in Iraq dropped to approximately 600 new infections per day at the top of the year, the country has recently observed a surge in case numbers, along with the identification of a new coronavirus variant.

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US Commerce Dept. Unveils Names of 14 Entities Sanctioned Over Alleged Poisoning of Navalny

by [Evan Craighead](#)

The European Union and US have both slapped sanctions on several Russian government officials and entities over the jailing and alleged poisoning of vlogger Alexei Navalny. The US



Department of Commerce blacklisted a total of fourteen entities - ten of which are located in Russia - and several individuals already targeted by EU sanctions.

Hours after Washington's initial sanctions announcement, the US Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) revealed that Switzerland's ChimConnect, and Germany's ChimConnect, PharmContract and Rioli-Chemie were included in their Entity List. Russia's CHIMMED Group, Analit Products, LabInvest and seven additional Russian entities were also slapped with sanctions by the US Department of Commerce.

The [BIS release](#) highlighted that individuals, companies or organizations included in the Entity List are "reasonably believed to be involved, or to pose a significant risk of becoming involved, in activities contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States."

The US imposition of sanctions comes shortly after the EU's own blacklisting of several entities and officials.

Furthermore, United Nations Special Rapporteur Agnes Callamard [has accused](#) Russia of "the attempted obituary killing of Mr. Navalny" via "suspected nerve agent had been developed in the Soviet Union."

Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova has responded to allegations and sanctions brought against Russian entities and government officials.

"The absurd triumphs when the reason for the imposition of sanctions is declared to be a deliberately arranged provocation with the alleged 'poisoning' of Navalny with some 'chemical weapons,'" [she said](#).

"All this is just an excuse to continue open interference in our internal affairs. We do not intend to put up with this. We will react on the basis of the principle of reciprocity, not necessarily symmetrically."

The Department of Commerce also highlighted it would be "assessing appropriate measures to be implemented" under the Export Administration Regulations, due to US Secretary of State Anthony [Blinken's decision](#) to restrict defense exports.

"The Russian Government's use of chemical weapons is contrary to the national security and foreign policy interests of the United States, as well as international law," the statement read.

"The Department of Commerce is committed to preventing Russia from accessing sensitive U.S. technologies that might be diverted to its malign chemical and other weapons of mass destruction activities."

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Proposed Iowa Bill Seeks to Let Residents Purchase, Carry Guns Without Permit  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Presently, Iowa state law requires residents to fill out an application before they can be issued a Non-professional Permit to Carry Weapons (PCW) by their county sheriff. Iowans wishing to own firearms are also required to complete a certain level of training, which can be done online.

House Study Bill 254, a [bill proposal](#) introduced in the Iowa House of Representatives in February, was recommended for passage with a 2-1 vote following a Tuesday Public Safety [subcommittee meeting](#).

Under the proposed legislation, private citizens would no longer have to obtain a PCW before they purchase their first firearm. However, a licensed merchant could be slapped with a class 'D' felony if found to have sold, rented or loaned a firearm to someone they know, "or reasonably should know" should not own a firearm, according to the bill.

If convicted, the gun dealer would face up to five years in prison.

Reps. Steven Holt and Jarad Klein, both Republican members of the larger Public Safety Committee, voted in favor of the bill while Democratic Rep. Beth Wessel-Kroeschell opposed recommending the legislation for passage.

"Those who cannot legally possess a firearm, I will say again, will still not be able to legally possess a firearm under the provisions of this bill," Holt, chair of the state's House Public Safety Committee, [told The](#) Des Moines Register. "And those practicing their Second Amendment rights will no longer have to get a permission slip to practice their basic fundamental rights." Wessel-Kroeschell told the outlet the law is just one of several politically polarizing bills brought before the state lawmaking body.

"Repealing Iowa's bedrock public safety laws such as the background check law and the permitting requirement for carrying a concealed gun is extreme and it's unpopular and a threat to public safety," she stated. "Iowans strongly support permit to carry and background checks for the purchase of a firearm."

While background checks would still be required for those seeking to buy a firearm from a licensed merchant, House File 223 - another state [bill proposal](#) up for consideration - would theoretically make more individuals eligible for gun ownership by expunging those who have nonviolent class 'D' felonies following a 10-year period.

According to Iowa Mental Health Advocacy lobbyist Leslie Carpenter, it would benefit the state in the long-run to keep its permit system for firearm ownership.

"Iowa's current background checks and permits do reduce gun violence and they reduce the public's fear of guns being in the hands of those who we all agree shouldn't have guns," she told the Register.

At the same time, Iowa Firearms Coalition lobbyist Richard Rogers argued the proposed legislation could be a lifesaver in self-defense situations.

"The principal benefit of this change, removing the requirement for a permit to carry, will fall to those who suddenly find themselves seriously threatened and need and want a gun now," he said. "A young mother in an abusive relationship or a shop owner being stalked by an angry former, ex-employee, for instance."

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Nike VP Resigns After Son Bragged About Reselling Shoes in Business Interview  
Pixabay  
by [Evan Craighead](#)



Joe Hebert, owner of West Coast Streetwear (WCS LLC.) and son of now-former Nike executive Ann Hebert, was featured last week in a Bloomberg Businessweek article. During the interview, the 19-year-old business owner bragged about his company's reselling profits and, inadvertently, revealed he purchased shoes with his mother's corporate card.

Nike issued a company statement Monday announcing the departure of Ann Hebert, vice president, general manager for the company's North America division.

"Ann Hebert, VP/GM, North America Geography has decided to step down from Nike, effective immediately. We thank Ann for more than 25 years with Nike and wish her well," the company [statement read](#).

Hebert's resignation comes less than a year after she replaced the outgoing VP/GM.

At the time, Heidi O'Neill, Nike's president of consumer and marketplace, [underscored that](#) Hebert's role would be related to "providing consumers with the most innovative product and compelling services and experiences to deliver long-term sustainable growth for Nike."

These responsibilities also included accelerating the "Consumer Direct Offense" in North America, which [is linked](#) to the recent shoe resale industry boom in the US.

Many speculate the Nike exec's resignation comes as a direct result of a recent [Bloomberg article](#) written by Joshua Hunt, and featuring her son, Joe Hebert.

The 19-year-old, who also goes by 'West Coast Joe,' told Hunt that "if you know the right people" in Portland, Oregon, one can get "access to stuff that, like, a normal person would not have access to."

In an attempt to verify profits earned by his company, Joe Hebert provided the outlet with past credit card statements. However, it was Ann Hebert's name, not his, that was on the bank document.

"Nike's marketing and corporate culture are strong enough in Portland that most anyone there can steep in it; the children of company executives, no doubt even more so," Hunt wrote.

According to Nike, Hebert's resignation came of her own accord.

"There was no violation of company policy, privileged information or conflicts of interest, nor is there any commercial affiliation between WCS LLC and Nike, including the direct buying or selling of Nike products," Nike spokesperson Sandra Carreon-John told Bloomberg.

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RPT - Ex-Smithsonian Specialist Gives Russian Cultural Center 100 Books on Art, History

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - The Russian Cultural Center (RCC) in Washington, DC received a gift of around 100 history and art books, donor and former Smithsonian Institution senior historic preservation specialist, Amy Ballard, told Sputnik.

"I just had a really wide variety of books that are in context of Russian history... music and art," Ballard said. "I decided that those would be the gift for the [Russian] Cultural Center."

Ballard said she dedicated the donation to the memory of her friend, and one of the RCC founders, Vladimir Tolstoy and looks forward to providing the rest of her Russian library to the cultural center.

The self-made collection, compiled by Ballard during her multiple trips to the Soviet Union and Russia, includes books on the Hermitage, the Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg, Moscow's Tretyakov Gallery and other museums.

The gift also includes a large number of books about the imperial dynasty of the Romanovs, which ruled Russia from 1613 until the revolution in 1917.

Ballard said her interest in Russia started when she was 14 years old after reading the book "Nicholas and Alexandra," by Robert Massie, which was about the last Russian Tsar and his wife. Ballard, who was living in the state of California at the time, asked her parents to take her to Russian churches and restaurants. She also told them she wanted to meet Russians. Ballard said her parents asked "What? What has happened to you?"

Although the family could not understand this unexpected interest in Russia, they did everything to satisfy this thirst, and even subscribed to the monthly magazine Soviet Life.

In fact, it was Ballard's parents who organized her first trip to Russia in 1973. That voyage comprised not only traditional tourist destinations like Moscow and Saint Petersburg, but also other cities in different parts of the USSR, including Central Asia and Siberia. Since that time Ballard began visiting Russia several times per year.

She visited the far north, including Sakhalin Island and the city of Magadan and participated in scientific conferences in Vladivostok, Khabarovsk and Ekaterinburg.

Ballard described herself as a Saint Petersburg Philharmonic fan. She was lucky to visit the former Russian Empire capital many times while working at the Smithsonian Institution and participating in conferences on architecture.

"I have always been interested in restoration of palaces after World War II. I think it is incredible. So I learned a lot from Russian colleagues," she said.

Ballard expressed regrets that the pandemic did not allow her to come back to Russia last year, but hopes to renew these trips in 2022, and said she has already signed up to go to Kamchatka.

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RPT - UN Security Council to Discuss Situation in Myanmar This Week - Diplomatic Source

UNITED NATIONS, March 2 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council may convene on Friday for consultations on the developments in Myanmar, following the United States' request for holding such a meeting, a diplomatic source at the organization told Sputnik.

"The President of the Security Council [the United States] requested the UN Secretariat to start preparations for the consultations to be held on Friday morning," the source said on Tuesday. Myanmar has been rocked by protests against the military after it overthrew the government and declared a year-long state of emergency on February 1. More than 20 people have been killed in protests.



The nation's civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi was arrested and put on trial alongside other senior officials, after the military accused her party of rigging the November elections.

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RPT: REVIEW - US Slaps Russia With First Round of Biden-Era Sanctions

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - The United States imposed a flurry of sanctions on Russia's senior officials, security services, scientific institutions and the country over alleged mistreatment of opposition figure Alexey Navalny in a first major punitive action by the Biden administration.

The sanctions, which include visa bans, trade restrictions and asset freezes, were rolled out by departments of State, Commerce and Treasury in close coordination with the European Union. The bloc announced an identical response to the alleged poisoning and subsequent imprisonment of Navalny.

"The US government has exercised its authorities to send a clear signal that Russia's use of chemical weapons and abuse of human rights has severe consequences. Any use of chemical weapons is unacceptable and contravenes international norms," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement on Tuesday.

Russia denies the allegations that its intelligence officers used the military-grade nerve agent Novichok against Navalny, who upon returning from a medical treatment in Germany was tried and sentenced to almost three years in prison for violating his probation on financial fraud charges and described by Moscow as unrelated to his political activism.

The State Department issued a determination that "the government of the Russian Federation has used a chemical weapon against its own nationals, in violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention."

As a result, the Biden administration is terminating any assistance to Russia, except for urgent humanitarian needs, deny any credit or credit guarantees, stop any defense articles or services sales. Some of these measures, however, will be fully or partially mitigated by waivers and others exemptions.

The Chemical and Biological Weapons Control and Warfare Elimination Act of 1991 further obligates the president to invoke at least three additional sanctions from the list of six options unless Russia rectifies its record. These options include further export and import restrictions, prohibition of US bank loans, opposition to the extension of multilateral development bank assistance, suspension or downgrade of the diplomatic relations and termination of air carrier landing rights.

The Treasury Department designated seven senior Russian officials for their alleged role in the Navalny case. The list includes Federal Security Service Director Aleksandr Bortnikov, Prosecutor General Igor Krasnov, Kremlin Domestic Policy Directorate head Andrei Yarin, First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Executive Office Sergei Kiriyenko, and Alexander Kalashnikov, whose Federal Penitentiary Service accused Navalny of violating the terms of parole and sought his arrest.

The Treasury Department action also targets Deputy Defense Ministers Aleksey Krivoruchko and Pavel Popov who are responsible for armaments and research activities, respectively. The Treasury Department's designation requires that all their property in the United States be blocked and prohibits Americans from engaging in transactions with them. Any foreign person who knowingly facilitates a significant transaction for or on behalf of one of these individuals also risks being sanctioned, the Treasury Department warned.

The Commerce Department said that it is blacklisting for possible trade restrictions 14 entities in Russia, Germany and Switzerland for their alleged "proliferation activities in support of Russia's weapons of mass destruction programs and chemical weapons activities."

The interagency action also targets Russia's 27th Scientific Center, 33rd Scientific Research and Testing Institute, the State Scientific Research Institute of Organic Chemistry and Technology, and two security agencies - the Federal Security Service and the Main Intelligence Directorate, including two its officers Alexander Mishkin and Anatoliy Chepiga.

The sanctions are imposed mainly under Executive Order 13382, which targets weapons of mass destruction proliferators as well as the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). The new action in some cases targets individuals, like Mishkin and Chepiga, and entities who were sanctioned as early as in 2018 over the alleged poisoning of double agent Sergei Skripal in the United Kingdom - an allegation also rejected by Russia.

The White House said that more sanctions may be coming after it completes a comprehensive intelligence review of a whole range of Russia-attributed grievances - from election interference and Solar Winds cyberattacks to bounties in Afghanistan. The United States, however, seeks further cooperation with Russia wherever it serves its interests, a US official said.

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#### **Canada's Top Doctor Says Advisory Committee Will 'Adjust' AstraZeneca Recommendation**

TORONTO, March 2 (Sputnik) - Canada's National Advisory Committee on Immunizations (NACI) will adjust its decision not to recommend the Oxford-AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine to anyone aged 65 and older, the country's chief medical officer said.

On Monday, NACI said in a statement that it does not recommend vaccinating seniors with the AstraZeneca vaccine that Canadian health regulators authorized last week. However, Health Canada indicated that vaccination with the AstraZeneca vaccine would proceed according to its guidelines, which allow for all Canadians over the age of 18 to get the UK-Swedish drugmaker's inoculation.

"Fundamentally, [NACI] will update... as they see more and more real-world data accumulating that will be adjusted," Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam told reporters on Tuesday.

Tam recommended not to read NACI's guidance as "static," insisting that the independent advisory committee would update its position.

Canada's chief medical officer and her deputy, Dr. Howard Njoo, also cited new real-world data in blessing British Columbia's plan to delay the second inoculation until four months. However, the US government's infectious diseases expert, Dr. Anthony Fauci, has said that the United



States will stick with the recommended timelines – 21 for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and 28 for Moderna – the number days between shots.

Health Canada's decision to press on with AstraZeneca inoculations for patients of all ages despite NACI's recommendations is not sitting well with the opposition. Shadow Minister of Health, Conservative MP Michelle Rempel Garner, told reporters that Trudeau government should agree to hold parliamentary hearings regarding the report as soon as possible.

Multiple countries, including South Korea and Portugal, have postponed immunization of seniors with the AstraZeneca vaccine until the manufacturer provides additional data on the vaccine's effect on senior citizens and local experts verify its efficacy for the group.

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US, Qatari Top Diplomats Hold Talks on Afghan Peace Process - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke to Qatari counterpart Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani about facilitation of the Afghan peace process, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement.

US Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad is expected to meet with Taliban representatives in Doha this week in a bid to push intra-Afghan talks forward. The Biden administration has been mulling whether to delay the US troop exit beyond the May 1 deadline stipulated in last February's Doha pact. "Secretary Blinken... discussed Qatar's support in facilitating the Afghan peace process," Price said after the phone call on Tuesday.

On Sunday, the Taliban warned the United States to comply with the agreement signed with former US President Donald Trump or face consequences. Earlier in February, a Taliban negotiator said the insurgents will kill any Americans that are still in Afghanistan after May 1.

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Blinken Tells Guaido US Backs Continuing Multilateral Pressure on Maduro - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State in a telephone call with Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaido said the Biden administration supports continued pressure on President Nicolas Maduro, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press release.

"Secretary Blinken described our efforts to work with likeminded allies, including the European Union, Lima Group, Organization of American States, and International Contact Group, to increase multilateral pressure and press for a peaceful, democratic transition," Price said in the release on Tuesday.

Biden and Guaido also discussed the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, Price said.

In January, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro called on the new US government to stop demonizing the Latin American country and to build a new relationship based on respect for sovereignty.

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US VP Harris, Australian PM Discuss Boosting Cooperation on China, Myanmar - White House

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison in a telephone call discussed ways to further cooperate on issues concerning China and Myanmar, the White House said in a press release.

"The Vice President and Prime Minister discussed opportunities for further cooperation on global and regional challenges, including those posed by climate change, China, Burma [Myanmar], and other regional issues," the release said on Tuesday.

Harris and Morrison also vowed to further bilateral cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, the release added.

Moreover, the two leaders discussed ways to promote global economic recovery from the pandemic, the release said.

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US State of Texas Lifts COVID-19 Mask Mandate, Allows All Businesses to Reopen - Governor

EL PASO, March 2 (Sputnik) - Texas Governor Greg Abbott said he is rolling back novel coronavirus-related restrictions by lifting a statewide mask mandate and allowing all businesses in the state to reopen.

"Effective next Wednesday, all businesses of any type are allowed to open 100 percent, that includes any type of entity in Texas. Also, I'm ending the statewide mask mandate," Abbott said in a press conference on Tuesday.

Other US states that have lifted the mask mandate include Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, and Tennessee.

On Monday, US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said now is not the time for states to relax public health measures put in place to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus.

Walensky warned about the potential for a fourth surge in new COVID-19 cases after the declining trajectory appears to have stalled.



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**Blinken to Deliver Foreign Policy Speech on Wednesday - State Department**

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken plans to deliver a foreign policy speech on Wednesday, the State Department said in a press release.

"Secretary of State Antony Blinken will deliver a speech on US foreign policy at 11:00 a.m. [EST] on Wednesday, March 3, 2021, at the Department of State," the release said on Tuesday. The State Department offered no details as to the topic of the speech, which follows new US sanctions on Russia, a bid to recalibrate relations with Saudi Arabia, diplomatic push to end a war in Yemen and to revive the Iranian nuclear deal.

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**US Taps Defense Production Act For \$10M In Advanced Semiconductor Investment - Pentagon**

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - Draper, a research firm that develops technology for military and civilian uses, will receive \$10 million under the US Defense Production Act to expand production capabilities for three dimensional (3D), ultra-high-density microelectronics modules, the Defense Department announced.

"The Department of Defense (DOD) entered into a \$14 million agreement with Draper to enhance the United States' ability for volume production of advanced packaging solutions for computer chips embedded within defense systems," the agency said in a press release on Tuesday.

The Defense Production Act will provide \$10 million with the Defense Department's Industrial Base Analysis and Sustainment (IBAS) adding another \$4 million, the release said.



The funding will help expand Draper's integrated ultra-high-density high-volume production at i3 Microsystems' fabrication facility in the US state of Florida, the release added.

Access to secure state-of-the-art microelectronics used by military systems like aircraft, ground vehicles and complex weapons systems is critical to ensuring the US technological advantage, according to the release.

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"I just had a really wide variety of books that are in context of Russian history... music and art," Ballard said. "I decided that those would be the gift for the [Russian] Cultural Center."

Ballad said she dedicated the donation to the memory of her friend, and one of the RCC founders, Vladimir Tolstoy and looks forward to providing the rest of her Russian library to the cultural center.

The self-made collection, compiled by Ballard during her multiple trips to the Soviet Union and Russia, includes books on the Hermitage, the Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg, Moscow's Tretyakov Gallery and other museums.

The gift also includes a large number of books about the imperial dynasty of the Romanovs, which ruled Russia from 1613 until the revolution in 1917.

Ballard said her interest in Russia started when she was 14 years old after reading the book "Nicholas and Alexandra," by Robert Massie, which was about the last Russian Tsar and his wife. Ballard, who was living in the state of California at the time, asked her parents to take her to Russian churches and restaurants. She also told them she wanted to meet Russians. Ballard said her parents asked "What? What has happened to you?"

Although the family could not understand this unexpected interest in Russia, they did everything to satisfy this thirst, and even subscribed to the monthly magazine Soviet Life.

In fact, it was Ballard's parents who organized her first trip to Russia in 1973. That voyage comprised not only traditional tourist destinations like Moscow and Saint Petersburg, but also other cities in different parts of the USSR, including Central Asia and Siberia. Since that time Ballard began visiting Russia several times per year.

She visited the far north, including Sakhalin Island and the city of Magadan and participated in scientific conferences in Vladivostok, Khabarovsk and Ekaterinburg.

Ballard described herself as a Saint Petersburg Philharmonic fan. She was lucky to visit the former Russian Empire capital many times while working at the Smithsonian Institution and participating in conferences on architecture.

"I have always been interested in restoration of palaces after World War II. I think it is incredible. So I learned a lot from Russian colleagues," she said.

Ballard expressed regrets that the pandemic did not allow her to come back to Russia last year, but hopes to renew these trips in 2022, and said she has already signed up to go to Kamchatka.

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US in Contact With Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority on Journalist Detentions - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - The United States has been in touch with the Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority and with other government entities about the recent detentions of media representatives in the country, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing.

"When it comes to the detention of the journalists that you mentioned, we are following those reports closely. We've been in touch with the Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority and other Ethiopian government officials to express our concern and to seek an explanation," Price said on Tuesday. "These actions appeared inconsistent with the Ethiopian government's commitment to permit international media access to Tigray."

Price also stressed that the United States is deeply concerned by reports of atrocities and the overall deteriorating situation in the Tigray region.

"We strongly condemn the killings, the forced removals and displacement, the sexual assaults and other human rights violations and abuses by several parties that multiple organizations now have reported in Tigray," he said.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken talked over the telephone with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed earlier on Tuesday and urged the Ethiopian government to take specific steps to prevent further violence in the Tigray region. Blinken also called for the withdrawal of the Amhara regional security forces and Eritrean troops from the Tigray region. In addition, Blinken asked the Ethiopian government to work with the international community to facilitate independent investigations into alleged human rights abuses there.

Fighting in the province of Tigray broke out in November after the Ethiopian government accused the local ruling party - Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) - of attacking a regional military base to hijack weapons and arm the anti-government militia. Roughly 40,000 Ethiopian citizens have fled to Sudan following the beginning of the conflict.

Ethiopian Ambassador to South Africa Shiferaw Teklemariam Menbacho told Sputnik in early February that ensuring peace in Tigray is the responsibility of the Ethiopian government and its military operation in the region aims to restore law and order.

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Fifth of Americans Reject Democracy Promotion as Top US Foreign Policy Objective - Poll



WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - A mere 20 percent of Americans consider promoting democracy in other nations a top US foreign policy priority, placing global US proselytizing of democratic virtues less important than 19 objectives, according to a PEW Research Center poll. "Just 20 percent of .S adults cited this as a top foreign policy objective, putting it at the bottom of the list of 20 topics polled," PEW Research Center said in a press release on Tuesday. "Only about a quarter of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents (24 percent) saw promoting democracy abroad as a priority, with even less support coming from Republicans and GOP leaners (15 percent)."

PEW noted that democracy promotion has been a popular theme for presidents of both parties dating back to Democratic President Woodrow Wilson 1917 declaration that the United States entered World War I to make the world "safe for democracy." The release attributed similar support for Democracy promotion to Republican President George W. Bush and President Joe Biden, a Democrat.

PEW asked 2,596 Americans to choose from a list of 20 priorities for a report on their foreign policy attitudes. Issues ranking at the top included protecting American jobs (75 percent), reducing the spread of infectious diseases (71 percent), and protecting against terrorist attacks (71 percent.)

Joining democracy promotion at the bottom of the list were reducing legal immigration (22 percent) and aiding refugees fleeing violence (28 percent), according to the PEW Research Center.

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UN Security Council to Discuss Situation in Myanmar This Week - Diplomatic Source

UNITED NATIONS, March 2 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council may convene on Friday for consultations on the developments in Myanmar, following the United States' request for holding such a meeting, a diplomatic source at the organization told Sputnik.

"The President of the Security Council [the United States] requested the UN Secretariat to start preparations for the consultations to be held on Friday morning," the source said on Tuesday. Myanmar has been rocked by protests against the military after it overthrew the government and declared a year-long state of emergency on February 1. More than 20 people have been killed in protests.

The nation's civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi was arrested and put on trial alongside other senior officials, after the military accused her party of rigging the November elections.

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Biden Says No Crisis at Southern Border, US 'Will Be Able to Handle' Influx of Migrants

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said there is no immigration crisis and his administration will be able to handle the influx of migrants illegally crossing the US-Mexico border.

"No, we'll be able to handle it - God willing," Biden said on Tuesday when asked if he thinks there is a crisis at the southern border.

US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents have recently encountered large groups of migrants, most from Central America, illegally crossing the country's southern border into the United States.

An increase of migrant children apprehended at the southern border has required the Biden administration to open up at least two temporary facilities to house them in while they go through immigration proceedings.

The Biden administration is continuing to expel migrant children who illegally come to the United States with a parent by using restrictions related to the novel coronavirus pandemic that were previously put in place.

CBP said it has seen a steady increase in border encounters since April 2020, which has caused some facilities to reach maximum safe holding capacity. CBP data shows that more than 70,000 migrants have been apprehended at the US-Mexico border each month from October to January.

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US Commerce Dept. Unveils Names of 14 Entities Sanctioned Over Navalny

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Commerce has unveiled the names of 14 entities sanctioned in Russia, Germany, and Switzerland for their alleged role in the poisoning of Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny.

Earlier on Tuesday, the Biden administration revealed a new round of sanctions against 7 Russian officials and restrictions on trade. Russia has repeatedly denied all US allegations related to the Navalny case, saying Western countries ignored Moscow's requests for substantiating materials.

The list includes Germany's Chimconnect Gmbh, Pharmcontract Gmbh, Riol-Chemie and Switzerland's Chimconnect AG. Another ten entities subject to the restrictions are located in Russia: 27th Scientific Center of the Russian Ministry of Defense, Chimmed Group, Femteco, Interlab, LabInvest, OOO Analit Products, OOO Intertech Instruments, Pha

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US Secretary of State, Norwegian Foreign Minister Discuss Fighting Pandemic - State Dept.



WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his Norwegian counterpart Ine Marie Eriksen Soreide spoke about joint efforts on a number of issues including fighting the global pandemic, international security and Afghanistan peace negotiations, spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement.

"Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Soreide discussed efforts to defeat the global pandemic and to deepen cooperation on the United Nations Security Council, climate change, human rights, Arctic issues, Transatlantic security, and global peace efforts, including Afghanistan peace negotiations," Price said on Tuesday.

The United States and Norway continue their fights against the pandemic with the US being the world leader in terms of both number of cases (28.7 million) and deaths (nearly 516,000), according to Johns Hopkins University.

Norway, meanwhile, has just over 72,000 cases with 623 deaths.

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**Merck to Help Produce Johnson & Johnson Coronavirus Vaccine - Biden**

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden announced that pharmaceutical giant Merck & Co. will help produce Johnson & Johnson's single-shot coronavirus vaccines in a move bound to accelerate the inoculation campaign in the United States.

Biden said that the United States is now on track to have enough vaccine supply for every adult in America by the end of May, two months ahead of schedule.

"Johnson & Johnson and Merck will work together to expand the production of Johnson & Johnson's vaccine. This is a type of collaboration between companies we saw in World War II," Biden said in televised remarks.

The US president promised to invoke the Defense Production Act to equip two Merck facilities to the standards necessary to safely manufacture the Johnson & Johnson vaccine. In addition, the Johnson & Johnson's vaccine manufacturing facilities will now begin to operate 24 hours a day seven days a week, Biden said.

Merck, one of the world's largest vaccine makers, had tried to produce a vaccine of its own but failed.

On Saturday, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced that it had given emergency use authorization to the Johnson & Johnson vaccine. The vaccine was the third candidate to be given FDA approval, following authorization for vaccines produced by Pfizer and Moderna.

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**Biden Says US to Have Enough COVID-19 Vaccines for Every American Adult by End of May**

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said the United States will have enough novel coronavirus vaccines for every American adult by the end of May because of a stepped-up production process.

"This country will have enough vaccines supply for every adult in America by the end of May," Biden said on Tuesday.

Biden pointed out that he is cautiously optimistic that by next March, the coronavirus pandemic will have diminished, but warned that there is still potential for significant losses from the disease if the public does not remain vigilant.

Earlier on Tuesday, Texas Governor Greg Abbott announced he was lifting the statewide mask mandate and allowing all businesses in the state to reopen by next Wednesday.

US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky on Monday said now is not the time for states to relax public health measures put in place to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus.

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#### Biden Says Hopes Life Will Return to Pre-Pandemic in One Year

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said he hopes life will return back to normal from the novel coronavirus pandemic in about one year.

"I've been cautioned not to give an answer to that because we don't know for sure, but my hope is by this time next year we're going to be back to normal, maybe even before that, I hope," Biden told reporters on Tuesday.

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#### House Democrats Launch Issues Conference to Promote Legislative Agenda

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - US House Democrats began an virtual "issues conference" featuring President Joe Biden, senior officials in his administration and activists that began Tuesday afternoon and is slated to last two days, Democratic Caucus Chair Hakeem Jeffries told reporters.

"We look forward to a very robust conversation and dialogue with practitioners, activists, academics, community leaders and high ranking government officials including the president of the United States, the vice president, the secretary of state, the former secretary of state who is the climate envoy," Jeffries said during a press conference on Tuesday.

Jeffries cited a menu of items reflecting the Democratic agenda in the 117th Congress, including legislation to address systemic racism and economic measures that address concerns of "every-day Americans."

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi characterized the event as "a time for reflection a time for us to listen and to learn about some of the challenges we face and some of the solutions that go with them."

Among the early participants, Vice President Kamala Harris was slated to address the conference Tuesday night.

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**Biden Says US to Have Enough COVID-19 Vaccines for Every American Adult by End of May**

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said that because of a stepped-up production process, the United States will have enough novel coronavirus vaccines for every American adult by the end of May.

"This country will have enough vaccines supply for every adult in America by the end of May," Biden said on Tuesday.

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**Canadian Minister Says AstraZeneca Indicated No Issues With Exporting Vaccines From US**

TORONTO, March 2 (Sputnik) - AstraZeneca has indicated to the Canadian government that its order of 20 million coronavirus vaccines doses will be delivered to Canada in the second quarter of 2021 without problems and or interference from the United States, Minister of Public Services and Procurement Anita Anand said.

The administration of President Joe Biden has said that the United States will not be sharing its supplies of the coronavirus vaccine until the US public is inoculated. Canada already receives its supplies of Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines from Europe after former US President Donald Trump signed an executive order to prioritize domestic distribution of vaccines over their shipments to foreign countries.

"On the question of assurances from the United States: we are in close touch... with [AstraZeneca] that has indicated it has not seen any problems with the export of doses to Canada," Anand told reporters on Monday.

Anand said the Canadian embassy in Washington will work to ensure that the shipment from the United States will make it across the border, citing the Trudeau government's ability to procure personal protective equipment last spring after the United States pursued an aggressive approach that undercut Canada, among other countries.

However, the procurement minister conceded that the Canadian government inked vaccine deals in way that would allow for vaccine shipments from a variety of production facilities.



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#### **Norway Energy Minister Says Green Tech Will Not Succeed Without Private Sector Incentives**

TORONTO, March 2 (Sputnik) - Initiatives and technologies designed to address environmental sustainability will not succeed without incentives for the private sector as a lot of the green solutions are not commercially viable, Norway's Minister of Petroleum and Energy Tina Bru said on Tuesday.

"A lot of these new technologies, a lot of these new industries that we are looking at to be part of bringing us through the green transition are, as of today, not something that is always commercially viable on its own. So, you're going to need a lot of government supports but if you don't have clear incentives for private investors to join in, I believe it won't be a success," Bru told a CERAWWeek energy conference virtual panel.

Bru cited Norway's carbon capture, utilization and storage (CCUS) project as an example, saying that while projects like this demonstrate the capability of new technology, if more partners - other countries and the private sector - decline to implement these solutions, there is not much value to Norway's efforts.

CERAWWeek brings together global leaders to advance new ideas and solutions to the biggest challenges facing the future of energy, the environment and climate. The annual gathering includes CEOs and officials from the global energy and utilities, as well as the automotive, manufacturing, policy, financial and tech communities.

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#### **SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY**

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) -

#### **NEW US, EU SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA**

\* The United States has imposed sanctions on seven senior Russian officials, including Federal Security Service (FSB) Director Aleksandr Bortnikov and Prosecutor General Igor Krasnov, over the alleged poisoning and imprisonment of opposition figure Alexey Navalny, the US Department of the Treasury announced in a statement on Tuesday.

\* The US government has sanctioned three Russian scientific institutions and imposed additional penalties on the country's two security services over the alleged poisoning of opposition figure Alexey Navalny, the Treasury Department said.

\* The US government is also imposing sanctions on 14 entities involved in biological and chemical agents production, a senior administration official said in a press briefing.

\* The United States is imposing sanctions against Russia over Navalny as only a first step, with more actions to follow in the coming week, the senior administration official told reporters.

\* The European Union confirmed it had imposed its first sanctions under the new global human rights violations act against four Russian citizens for the arrest of Navalny, according to a document published in the EU Official Journal.

\* Russia will surely respond to Washington if it imposes new anti-Russia sanctions over the case of Navalny, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

#### US STEPS ON RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA

\* The United States will add Russia to a list of nations subject to deny exports of defense articles and services, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said on Tuesday.

\* The US government has excluded some space cooperation with Russia from newly imposed sanctions, Blinken said.

\* The US government will cease all aid to Russia under the Foreign Assistance Act excluding urgent humanitarian aid, the State Department said.

\* The Biden administration is not seeking to reset or escalate relations with Russia, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said.

#### CORONAVIRUS VACCINES

\* The deliveries of Pfizer's coronavirus vaccines via the World Health Organization-led COVAX facility have been delayed as the US pharma giant made countries do "additional work" on indemnification, Seth Berkeley, the CEO of the international vaccine alliance Gavi, said on Tuesday.

\* The COVAX coronavirus vaccine distribution facility plans to deliver vaccine doses to Angola, Cambodia, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Nigeria later on Tuesday, World Health Organization (WHO) Director General Tedros Adhanom announced.

#### UNREST IN ARMENIA

\* The united Armenian opposition parties on Tuesday requested an urgent meeting with President Armen Sarkissian after he decided not to sign a decree on the dismissal of General Staff Chief Onik Gasparyan and did not send the draft decree to the Constitutional Court.

\* Sarkissian will not sign a decree on the dismissal of General Staff Chief Onik Gasparyan, and, in this case, the decision will enter into force automatically under the country's constitution, the president's office said.

#### YEMEN DEVELOPMENTS

\* The Houthis see no point in talks with the Yemeni government, deeming Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to be the only decision-makers that are worth talking to, Mohammed Ali Al-Houthi, a senior member of Yemen's Houthi-run Supreme Political Council, told Sputnik.

#### RUSSIA-BELARUS RELATIONS

\* Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said on Tuesday that he discussed the situation in Belarus and Russia with Russian President Vladimir Putin, adding that both sides have exchanged classified information of special services.

\* Lukashenko said that it makes sense for Belarus to host Russian aircraft for joint monitoring missions on existing airbases.

\* Lukashenko said that talks about Belarus-Russia merger into a single country are silly in the world that has "changed" so much.

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Senate Begins Debate on \$1.9Trln COVID-19 Bill Wednesday With March 14 Deadline –  
Schumer

WASHINGTON, March 3 (Sputnik) - The Senate plans to take up the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Act and expects to have President Biden sign the bill into law before the March 14 expiration of unemployment benefits in a previous COVID-19 relief measure, Majority eLeader Chuck Schumer said on Tuesday.

"We're on track to send the American rescue plan to the president's desk before the expiration of the enhanced unemployment benefit, which occurs on March 14. We could take it up as soon as tomorrow," Schumer said.

Schumer spoke at a press conference following a virtual meeting between President Joe Biden and Senate Democrats.

"President Biden made his pitch today to our entire caucus and he said we need to pass this bill and pass it soon," Schumer said.

The spending bill previously approved by the House includes \$1,400 payments to Americans, money to help reopen schools, subsidize businesses and expand distribution of coronavirus vaccines and testing supplies.

The legislation faces criticism from Republicans in both chambers of Congress, who charge that about \$1 trillion from previous pandemic relief packages remains unspent.

In addition, Republicans criticize the bill for "pork barrel" projects that have nothing to do with the pandemic.

These include funds in the millions of dollars for a bridge connecting Schumer's home state of New York to Canada and for an underground railway project in US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's home state of California.

With minorities in both the House and Senate, analysts say Republicans have little chance of stopping the measure from becoming law.

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US National Security Adviser, Italian Official Agree to Coordinate on Libya - White House

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and Italian Prime Minister Diplomatic Adviser Luigi Mattiolo in a phone call agreed to cooperate on a range of issues including Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean, National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said on Tuesday.



"They agreed to continue close coordination - both bilaterally and with the EU - on issues of shared interest, including Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean," Horne said in a statement. Sullivan also said the US supports the Italian presidency in the G20 and its attempts to contain the ongoing pandemic, to enhance a global economic recovery, and tackle the climate change crisis.

On February 5, the United States, Italy and two other allies said they welcomed the agreement on a unified interim Libyan executive authority. Libya has been split between two rival administrations after its longtime leader Muammar Gaddafi was overthrown in 2011. The western part of the country is controlled by the Government of National Accord and the eastern part by the Libyan National Army.

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US State Dept. Believes Myanmar's Envoy to UN Remains in Position Despite Opposing Coup  
WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - Myanmar's envoy to the United Nations Kyaw Moe Tun remains in his position despite recent comments opposing the military coup, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"When it comes to Kyaw Moe Tun, we understand the permanent representative remains in his position," Price said in a press briefing.

Price said the United States praises the envoy's recent address at the UN General Assembly, in which he announced that he had broken ranks with Myanmar's new government and called on the international community to oppose the military coup.

Myanmar's military overthrew the government and declared a year-long state of emergency on February 1, hours before the newly-elected parliament was due to convene. The nation's de facto leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, was arrested alongside other senior officials, after the military accused her party of rigging the November elections.

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US Senate Confirms Gina Raimondo as Secretary of Commerce

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Tuesday confirmed Gina Raimondo as the next Secretary of Commerce.

President Joe Biden's nominee has received support of a majority of senators: 84 lawmakers supported her confirmation, while 15 opposed it.

Raimondo currently serves as the governor of the US state of Rhode Island and will have to resign in order to assume the new position. In the period 2018-2019, Raimondo chaired the Democratic Governors Association.

The new Secretary of Commerce is expected to be sworn in on Wednesday.

Raimondo, 49, is a former venture capitalist. During her confirmation hearing in January, she promised to use all tools to ensure a playing level field for American workers with respect to dealing with China.

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US State of Texas Lifts COVID-19 Mask Mandate, Allows All Businesses to Reopen - Governor

EL PASO, March 2 (Sputnik) - Texas Governor Greg Abbott on Tuesday said he was rolling back novel coronavirus-related restrictions by lifting a statewide mask mandate and allowing all businesses in the state to reopen.

"Effective next Wednesday, all businesses of any type are allowed to open 100 percent, that includes any type of entity in Texas. Also, I'm ending the statewide mask mandate," Abbott said in a press conference.

On Monday, US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said now is not the time for states to relax public health measures put in place to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus.

Walensky warned about the potential for a fourth surge in new COVID-19 cases after the declining trajectory appears to have stalled.

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"Effective next Wednesday, all businesses of any type are allowed to open 100 percent, that includes any type of entity in Texas. Also, I'm ending the statewide mask mandate," Abbott said in a press conference.

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US Sanctions 14 Entities in Russia, Germany, Switzerland Over Navalny Case - Commerce Dept

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - The United States is restricting exports for 14 entities located in Russia, Germany, and Switzerland for their alleged role in the poisoning of Russian

opposition figure Alexey Navalny, the US Department of Commerce officially announced on Tuesday.

Earlier, the Biden administration revealed a new round of sanctions against Russian officials, including restrictions on trade. Russia has repeatedly denied all US allegations related to the Navalny case, saying Western countries ignored Moscow's requests for substantiating materials.

"The Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) is adding 14 entities located in Russia, Germany, and Switzerland to the Entity List based on their proliferation activities in support of Russia's weapons of mass destruction programs and chemical weapons activities," the Commerce Department said in a press release.

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#### US Democrats Reintroduce Legislation on Gun Sale Background Checks - Senator

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - More than forty US Senate Democrats reintroduced legislation to expand background checks for all firearms sales including gun show and online transactions, Senator Chris Murphy's office said in a press release on Tuesday.

"Murphy led 45 senators... in reintroducing the Background Check Expansion Act to expand federal background checks to all gun sales," the release said. "This requirement extends to all unlicensed sellers, whether they do business online, at gun shows, or out of their home."

There are a number of exceptions, the release added, including transfers between law enforcement officers along with hunting or immediate self-defense.

Up to 25 percent of US gun sales occur without a background check, the release said.

Meanwhile, more than 97% of Americans support such a measure, according to the release.

US lawmakers have previously failed to pass stricter gun control laws despite the waves of mass shootings that have plagued the country in recent years.

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#### US Senate Confirms Gina Raimondo as Secretary of Commerce

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Tuesday confirmed Gina Raimondo as the next Secretary of Commerce.

President Joe Biden's nominee has received support of a majority of senators, with voting still underway on her confirmation.

Raimondo currently serves as the governor of the US state of Rhode Island and will have to resign in order to assume the new position. In the period 2018-2019, Raimondo chaired the Democratic Governors Association.



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**UN Unsure About Myanmar's Representation After Receiving 2 Conflicting Letters - Spokesman**

UNITED NATIONS, March 2 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is not certain who represents Myanmar at the headquarters in New York after receiving two conflicting letters on the matter from the country's Permanent Representative and the military authorities, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

On Monday, the United Nations leadership received a letter from Kyaw Moe Tun, the Permanent Representative of Myanmar, informing that he remained country's envoy to the United Nations.

"We've also received a note verbal from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Myanmar this morning, informing that the State Administration Council of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar has terminated the duties and responsibilities of Mr Kyaw Tun... and that Mr. U Tin Maung Naing, Deputy Permanent Representative, has been assigned as charge d'affaires ad interim of the permanent mission," Dujarric said.

"We are in a very unique situation we have not seen in a long time. We are trying to sort through all the legal protocol and other implications," he added.

The military authorities fired Myanmar's envoy to the United Nations Kyaw Moe Tun on Friday shortly after he announced at the UN General Assembly that he had broken ranks with his country's new government and called on the international community to oppose the military coup.

Dujarric explained that it is up to member states to communicate to the United Nations who represents them at the organization. He added the UN Credentials Committee, chaired by Tanzania, then needs to make a recommendation on it and submit for the endorsement of the General Assembly.

When reached to clarify the situation, the Permanent Mission of Tanzania to the United Nations was not immediately available for comment.

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**Canada Top Doctor Says COVID-19 Case Count Leveled Off, Warns of Rising Variant Numbers**

TORONTO, March 2 (Sputnik) - The number of new coronavirus cases in Canada has plateaued, but the number of variant strain cases is increasing, Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam said on Tuesday.

Canadian health officials reported during the past seven-day period a daily average of 2,933 new coronavirus cases and 42 virus-related deaths, while the number of variant cases now exceeds 1,350, a near threefold increase since mid-February.

"Following a month-long decline in COVID-19 activity, daily case counts have levelled off and we are now seeing a moderate increase nationally," Tam said. "At the same time, the number of cases involving more contagious variants of concern, continues to increase."

Canadian health officials have identified 1,257 cases of the B.1.1.7 variant, which was first identified in the United Kingdom, 99 cases of B.1.351 variant first observed in South Africa and three cases of the P.1 variant, better known as the Brazilian variant.

Tam has previously said that public health officials are zeroing in on the B.1.1.7 variant as the strain is potentially able to displace the original coronavirus as the dominant strain in Canada.

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#### **First Shipment of AstraZeneca's Indian Version Vaccine to Arrive in Canada Wednesday**

TORONTO, March 2 (Sputnik) - The first shipment of 500,000 AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine doses made at the Serum Institute of India will arrive in Canada on Wednesday, Minister of Public Services and Procurement Anita Anand said.

"The first shipment of half a million AstraZeneca Covishield doses, which are now en route to Canada from the Serum Institute and scheduled to arrive in this country tomorrow," Anand told reporters on Tuesday.

Anand also said the Canadian government expects to receive a shipment of 444,600 vaccine doses from Pfizer this week.

Canada has so far secured two million doses of the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine version produced by the Serum Institute.

On Friday, Canadian health regulators authorized the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine along with its Indian analogue.

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#### **US Designates 7 Russian Officials for Sanctions Over Navalny Case - Treasury**

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on seven senior Russian officials, including Federal Security Service (FSB) Director Aleksandr Bortnikov and Prosecutor General Igor Krasnov, over the alleged poisoning and imprisonment of opposition figure Alexey Navalny, the US Department of the Treasury announced in a statement on Tuesday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) joined the US Departments of State and Commerce in imposing sanctions in response to Russia's poisoning and subsequent imprisonment of Russian opposition figure Aleksey Navalny," the statement said.

In addition to Bortnikov and Krasnov, OFAC also designated Presidential Policy Directorate Chief Andrei Yarin, First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Executive Office Sergei Kiriyenko, Deputy Minister of Defense Aleksey Krivoruchko, Deputy Minister of Defense Pavel Popov and Federal Penitentiary Service Director Alexander Kalashnikov.

As a result of the Treasury Department's actions, all property and interests in property of the designated individuals that come within the possession of US persons are blocked, and US persons are generally prohibited from engaging in transactions with them. Any foreign person who knowingly facilitates a significant transaction for or on behalf of them risks being sanctioned.

The Treasury Department explained that all seven Russian officials were designated pursuant to Executive Order 13661 that originally gave the US government the authority to block property of "persons contributing to the situation in Ukraine."

Bortnikov was additionally designated under Executive Order 13382 for "having engaged, or attempted to engage, in activities or transactions that have materially contributed to, or pose a risk of materially contributing to, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction," the release said.

The Russian authorities deny having any role in the alleged poisoning of Navalny.

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#### US Puts Russia on List of Countries Denied Exports of Defense Articles - State Dept

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - The United States will add Russia to a list of nations subject to denial for exports of defense articles and services, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said on Tuesday.

"The (State) Department will amend Section 126.1 of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations to include Russia in the list of countries subject to a policy of denial for exports of defense articles and defense services, with certain exceptions for exports to Russia in support of government space cooperation," Blinken said in a statement.

Blinken pointed out in the statement that the United States has excluded some space cooperation with Russia from newly imposed sanctions.

"Exports in support of commercial space cooperation, however, will be restricted following a six-month transition period," he said.

The State Department has also expanded existing sanctions against Russia under the US Chemical and Biological Weapons Control and Warfare Elimination Act of 1991 that were imposed following the alleged Skripal poisoning in the United Kingdom, Blinken said.

"The Department of State has also implemented measures under Executive Order (E.O.) 13382, which targets weapons of mass destruction proliferators, as well as the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) against multiple Russian individuals and entities associated with the Russian Federation's chemical weapons program and defense and intelligence sectors," he said.



Blinken noted that the Treasury Department has targeted seven Russian government officials, five of whom were previously designated by the European Union and the United Kingdom over Navalny's poisoning and two whom the bloc sanctioned in response to Navalny's arrest and imprisonment.

"The Department of Commerce is adding 14 entities to the Entity List based on their proliferation activities in support of Russia's weapons of mass destruction programs and chemical weapons activities," Blinken said.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said in December that a preliminary investigation was opened in the Navalny case, but an actual investigation could not be launched amid the lack of substantiating materials while the Western countries ignored Russia's requests for aid on the case.

In January, Navalny returned to Russia from Germany, where he was treated for the alleged poisoning, and was arrested upon arrival at Moscow's Sheremetyevo International Airport. Shortly after, a Moscow court rescinded Navalny's suspended sentence in the 2014 Yves Rocher fraud case over multiple probation breaches and replaced it with a three-and-a-half-year prison term.

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#### US Deploys Defense Production Act to Boost Production of Military Uniforms - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - The US government extended the nation's COVID-19 response to boost a company's ability to make dress military uniforms, the Defense Department said in a press release on Tuesday.

"As part of the national response to COVID-19, the Department of Defense (DOD) entered into a \$9.98 million agreement with Hardwick Tactical Corporation to sustain critical industrial base production of US Military dress uniforms," the release said.

The Defense Department explained that the subsidy will allow Hardwick Tactical Corporation to purchase and install equipment to increase manufacturing automation.

The increased production capacity will ensure the US government continues to have access to this domestic supplier of Berry Amendment compliant dress uniforms, the release said.

The Berry Amendment requires that military footwear and uniforms be made in the United States.

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#### US Reserves Right to Take More Steps Against Russia - White House

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - The United States reserves the right to take additional steps against Russia following a review of the country's actions, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Tuesday.

"That [Russia] review is ongoing and we of course reserve the right to take additional steps and take additional action at the conclusion," Psaki said in a press briefing.

Earlier, the Biden administration imposed a round of sanctions against Russian officials and entities over the alleged poisoning of opposition figure Alexey Navalny.

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US Sanctions on Russia Include Denial of Any Credit, Financial Assistance - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - The United States is imposing sanctions on Russia over the case of opposition figure Alexey Navalny in the form of denying that country any credit or other financial assistance by any US department or agency, the US Department of State said in a press release.

"Today, the Secretary of State determined that the government of the Russian Federation has used a chemical weapon against its own nationals," the release said. "As a result, the following sanctions will be imposed: Denial to Russia of any credit, credit guarantees, or other financial assistance by any department, agency, or instrumentality of the United States government, including the Export-Import Bank of the United States."

The State Department said the sanctions will remain in place for a minimum of 12 months.

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US Not Seeking to Reset or Escalate Relations With Russia - White House

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - The United States is not seeking to reset or escalate relations with Russia, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Tuesday.

"We expect the relationship to continue to be a challenge, we're prepared for that, and we're neither seeking to reset our relations with Russia nor are we seeking to escalate," Psaki said in a press briefing.

Earlier, the Biden administration imposed a round of sanctions against Russian officials and entities over the alleged poisoning of opposition figure Alexey Navalny.

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US Terminates Foreign Assistance to Russia Except Humanitarian Aid - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - The United States will cease all aid to Russia under the Foreign Assistance Act excluding urgent humanitarian aid, the State Department said on Tuesday.

"As a result, the following sanctions will be imposed (full or partial waivers are noted below) after the 15-day Congressional notification period," the department said in a statement. "Foreign Assistance: Termination of assistance to Russia under the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, except for urgent humanitarian assistance and food or other agricultural commodities or products."

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US Sanctions 3 Russian Science Centers, 2 Security Services over Navalny Case - Treasury  
WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - The United States has sanctioned three Russian scientific institutions and imposed additional penalties on the country's two security services over the alleged poisoning of opposition figure Alexey Navalny, the US Department of the Treasury announced on Tuesday.

The Treasury Department Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) added to the Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List Russia's 27th Scientific Center, 33rd Scientific Research and Testing Institute and the State Scientific Research Institute of Organic Chemistry and Technology.

The Federal Security Service and the Main Intelligence Directorate were also designated for additional sanctions.

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WTO Proposal Limiting Intellectual Property Rights For COVID-19 Worries US Business Group

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - A World Trade Organization (WTO) proposal to waive intellectual property rights (IP) to boost COVID-19 vaccine availability threatens to do the opposite by making inoculations less available while slowing responses to future pandemics, the US Chamber of Commerce warned on Tuesday.

"Proposals to waive intellectual property rights are misguided and a distraction from the real work of reinforcing supply chains and assisting countries to procure, distribute and administer vaccines to billions of the world's citizens," the Chamber of Commerce said in a press release. The business advocacy group added that weakening those rights would also make it more difficult to quickly "develop and distribute vaccines or treatments in the future pandemics the world will face."



Brazil and India are lobbying the global trade group to restrict IP during the pandemic, while the US, EU warn that limiting IP would fail to address production and distribution bottlenecks, according to media reports.

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**US Excludes Certain Space Cooperation With Russia From New Restrictions - State Dept**

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - The United States has excluded some space cooperation with Russia from newly imposed sanctions, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said in a statement on Tuesday.

"Exports in support of commercial space cooperation, however, will be restricted following a six-month transition period," Blinken said.

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In addition to Bortnikov and Krasnov, OFAC also designated Presidential Policy Directorate Chief Andrei Yarin, First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Executive Office Sergei Kiriyyenko, Deputy Minister of Defense Aleksey Krivoruchko, Deputy Minister of Defense Pavel Popov and Federal Penitentiary Service Director Alexander Kalashnikov.

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**Blinken Urges Concrete Steps to Prevent Further Violence in Tigray Region - US State Dept.**

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken talked over the telephone with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and urged the Ethiopian government to take specific steps to prevent further violence in the Tigray region, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"Noting the growing number of credible reports of atrocities and human rights violations and abuses, the Secretary urged the Ethiopian government to take immediate, concrete steps to protect civilians, including refugees, and to prevent further violence," Price said in a press release.

Blinken also called for the withdrawal of Amhara regional security forces and Eritrean troops from the Tigray region, the release said.

In addition, Blinken asked the Ethiopian government to work with the international community to facilitate independent investigations into alleged human rights abuses in the Tigray region.

Fighting in the province of Tigray broke out in November after the Ethiopian government accused the local ruling party - Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) - of attacking a regional military base to hijack weapons and arm the anti-government militia. Roughly 40,000 Ethiopian citizens have fled to Sudan following the beginning of the conflict.

Ethiopian Ambassador to South Africa Shiferaw Teklemariam Menbacho told Sputnik in early February that ensuring peace in Tigray is the responsibility of the Ethiopian government and its military operation in the region aims to restore law and order.

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**IOM Appeals for \$170Mln to Assist People in Yemen As Marib Fighting Deteriorates**

UNITED NATIONS, March 2 (Sputnik) - The International Organization for Migration (IOM) on Tuesday appealed for \$170 million from donors in order to assist people in Yemen affected by the ongoing conflict as the fighting in Marib has intensified.

"With over 10,500 people recently fleeing areas in Marib, where fighting has intensified in the last few weeks, IOM will dedicate at least a third of its requested funds to life-saving assistance for displaced people, migrants and local communities affected by the Marib crisis," IOM said in a statement.

IOM explained that a large portion of the displaced reside in the Marib governorate and at least three displacement sites have already been emptied after being impacted by the fighting.

The appeal seeks to support some five million people - four million displaced and the communities that host them.

With the requested funding, the UN agency said it will improve the living conditions in settlements and access to protection services, health care, water, sanitation and shelter, as well as provide cash assistance and carry out infrastructure improvements.

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FBI Task Force Expanded Focus Beyond Russia after 2018 to include China, Iran - Director

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - The Federal Bureau of Investigation expanded its efforts to combat malign foreign influence, originally locked solely on Russia, to include China, Iran, and others, FBI Director Christopher Wray told a Senate panel on Tuesday.

"Previously, our efforts to combat malign foreign influence focused solely on the threat posed by Russia. Utilizing lessons learned over the last year and half, the FITF is widening its aperture to confront malign foreign operations of China, Iran, and other global adversaries," Wray said in his testimony to the chamber's Judiciary Committee.

FITF - the Foreign Influence Task Force - was established in 2017 to identify and counteract malign foreign influence operations, including election interference. It is led by the FBI Counterintelligence Division and comprised of agents and analysts from the Counterintelligence, Cyber, Counterterrorism, and Criminal Investigative Divisions.

"Through the efforts of the FITF, and lessons learned from both the 2016 and 2018 elections, the FBI is actively engaged in identifying, detecting, and disrupting threats to our elections and ensuring both that the integrity of our democracy is preserved and that the will of the American people is fulfilled," Wray said.

The decision to expand the scope of FITF operations and provide the task force with additional resources followed the 2018 midterm elections, he added.

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FBI Doubled Domestic Terrorism Probes to 2,000 in 2021 - Director



WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - The FBI has doubled the number of domestic terrorism investigations over the last three and a half years to 2,000 conducted currently, Director Christopher Wray told the US Senate Judiciary Committee on Tuesday.

"In terms of domestic violent extremism, domestic terrorism that number has grown steadily on my watch. We have increased a number of domestic terrorism investigations from around a thousand or so when I got here to up to about 1,400 at the end of last year, to about 2,000 now," Wray said.

Wray warned that the problem of domestic terrorism has been "metastasizing" across the United States for a long time now and it is not going away any time soon.

Wray assumed the position Director of the FBI in 2017.

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Canada Sees Record Economic Decline in COVID-19 Plagued 2020 – Statistics Agency

TORONTO, March 2 (Sputnik) - The Canadian economy declined by a record 5.4 percent during a COVID-19-plagued 2020, the state statistics agency said on Tuesday.

"In 2020, real GDP shrank 5.4 percent, the steepest annual decline since quarterly data were first recorded in 1961," Statistics Canada said in its quarterly GDP report.

The statistics agency noted that economic activity did increase by 2.3 percent in the fourth quarter of 2020, although household disposal income dropped by 1 percent.

However, Canadian business experts and officials have warned that the resurgence of the coronavirus pandemic that began in late 2020 could hamper the country's economy in the first part of 2021. The Bank of Canada expects that the resurgence of the pandemic will place the country back into recession territory in the first quarter 2021.

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FBI Sees No Evidence of 'Fake' Trump Supporters Behind Capitol Attack - Director

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - The FBI has not seen any evidence of fake Trump supporters behind the attack on the US Capitol, which is investigated as a case of "domestic terrorism," FBI Director Christopher Wray told the US Senate Judiciary Committee on Tuesday.

"We have not seen evidence of that at this stage, certainly," Wray said when asked to comment on allegations the January 6 incident was organized by Trump's opponents to frame up the former president and his supporters.

Wray said the FBI has arrested more than 270 suspects, including members of right-wing militias and several white supremacists.

"We have arrested already more than 270 individuals to date, over 300 when you include the ones of our partners with more subjects being identified and charged just about every single day," Wray said.

"As we build out the individuals, whom we arrested for the violence, we are getting a richer and richer understanding of different people's motivations, but, certainly, as I said, militia violent extremism, some instances of racially motivated violent extremism specifically advocating for the superiority of the white race," Wray added.

On January 6, a group of Trump supporters breached the US Capitol to protest lawmakers accepting electoral states from several US states that Trump claims were invalid and robbed him of election victory. US House Democrats impeached Trump for inciting insurrection, but he was acquitted in the Senate.

Trump has repeatedly said that in his speech on January 6 he called on his supporters to protest peacefully and patriotically.

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**Saudi Aramco Expects Global Oil Demand to Reach 99Mln Barrels Per Day by Year End - CEO**

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - The demand for crude may reach 99 million barrels per day by the end of 2021, Aramco President and CEO Amin Nasser said during the CERAWEEK energy conference on Tuesday.

"The current demand that we see in the markets is about 94 million barrels. Our expectation by next year it's going to be 99 million barrels - this is the way we started back in January of 2020," Nasser said, adding that he expects the demand to continue to improve especially in the second half of the year.

Nasser emphasized that the oil market is improving at present after the significant drop in demand amid the height of the novel coronavirus pandemic last year.

"We have seen strong demand in China, East Asia," he said.

The Aramco chief also pointed out that demand for oil in India is also picking up and is almost as high as during the pre-coronavirus pandemic levels.

Nasser said the rapid deployment of vaccines is a good cause for optimism for the United States as well as other Western countries.

During the discussion, Chevron CEO Michael Wirth agreed with Nasser and said he too sees market improvements underway.

Wirth said the demand for diesel is just above the pre-pandemic levels, while the demand for gasoline is still "a little bit off."

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**Global Airline Passenger Traffic Drops in January, Down 72% From Jan 2019 - Trade Group**

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - Passenger loads went from bad to worse from December to January, with planes carrying 72 percent fewer people than in January 2019, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) said on Tuesday.

"Total demand in January 2021 (measured in revenue passenger kilometers or RPKs) was down 72.0% compared to January 2019. That was worse than the 69.7% year-over-year decline recorded in December 2020," IATA said in a press release.

The decline comes amid the emergence of new coronavirus variants that are prompting some governments to increase travel restrictions, even as vaccine programs expand, IATA said.

The uncertainty around how long these restrictions will last also appears to be impacting plans for future travel, IATA added.

For example, forward bookings in January for the upcoming summer travel season were 78 percent below levels in January 2019, according to IATA.

In a separate report, IATA said air cargo traffic recovered to pre-pandemic levels in January for the first time since the onset of the crisis.

"Global demand, measured in cargo ton-kilometers (CTKs\*), was up 1.1.% compared to January 2019 and +3% compared to December 2020," IATA said in a separate press release.

All regions saw month-on-month improvement in air cargo demand, and North America and Africa were the strongest performers, IATA said.

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**US Charges 2 Ecuador Citizens in Bribery, Money Laundering Pensions Plot - Justice Dept.**

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - The US government is prosecuting two citizens of Ecuador for their alleged roles in a plot to defraud the country's police pensions fund, the Department of Justice said in a press release on Tuesday.

"Criminal complaints have been unsealed charging two Ecuadorian citizens for their alleged roles in a bribery and money laundering scheme involving Ecuador's public police pension fund (ISSPOL)," the release said.

John Luzuriaga Aguinaga, 52, and Jorge Cherrez Mino, 46, were each charged with one count of conspiracy to commit money laundering in the Southern District of Florida on February 10 and February 19. Luzuriaga was arrested on February 26 and an arrest warrant has been issued for Cherrez who is believed to be in Mexico, the release said.

"As alleged in the complaints, between approximately 2014 and 2020, Cherrez, an investment advisor, paid more than \$2.6 million in bribes to ISSPOL officials, including at least approximately \$1,397,066 to Luzuriaga, ISSPOL's Risk Director and a member of ISSPOL's Investment Committee," the release said.

Cherrez allegedly obtained approximately \$65 million in profits from one aspect of the scheme, the release added.



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**US Sanctions Two Commanders of Yemen's Houthi Group - Treasury**

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on two commanders of Yemen's Houthi rebel group, the Treasury Department said on Tuesday. "Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control sanctioned two key militants of the Iranian-backed Ansarallah, sometimes referred to as the Houthis," the release said. "Mansur Al-Sa'adi and Ahmad 'Ali Ahsan al-Hamzi are responsible for orchestrating attacks by Houthi forces impacting Yemeni civilians, bordering nations, and commercial vessels in international waters."

Hamzi heads the Houthi-aligned Air Force and Air Defense Forces, while Saadi serves as the chief of Houthi Naval Forces, the release said.

"[T]he Houthis, with the support of the Iranian regime, have waged a bloody war against the internationally recognized Yemeni government using ballistic missiles, explosives, naval mines, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to attack bases, population centers, infrastructure, and nearby commercial shipping," the release added.

The two sanctioned individuals undertook their actions to advance the Iranian regime's destabilizing agenda, have fueled the Yemen conflict, displacing more than one million people and pushing Yemen to the brink of famine, according to the release.

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**US Launches Study of COVID-19 Linked Inflammatory Syndrome in Children - Health Dept.**

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - US scientists will begin researching multisystem inflammatory syndrome (MIS-C), a rare but deadly outcome of coronavirus infections in children, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) said on Tuesday.

"This research program is developing and funding studies to investigate why some children are at greater risk for SARS-CoV-2 infection than others, why symptoms vary among children who are infected, and how to identify children at risk for severe illness from SARS-CoV-2 infection," NIH said in a press release.

Much of the research will focus on MIS-C, a life-threatening condition marked by severe inflammation of one or more parts of the body, including the heart, lungs, kidneys, brain, skin, eyes and gastrointestinal organs.

Most children infected with the coronavirus do not develop serious illness, but those who do go on to develop MIS-C. Symptoms include prolonged fever and severe abdominal pain, although most children survive.

Projects in the NIH research plan include an examination of long-term outcomes of children who recover and a study of drugs used to treat COVID-19 when used in children.

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#### **US Imposes Sanctions on 7 Russian Officials, 14 Entities Over Navalny - Senior Official**

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - The United States is imposing sanctions on seven senior members of the Russian government and 14 entities over the case of opposition figure Alexey Navalny, a senior Biden administration official said during a press briefing on Tuesday. "Today, as part of a robust inter-agency response to the poisoning and imprisonment of opposition figure Alexey Navalny, the Treasury Department is designating seven senior members of the Russian government," the official said. "Later today, we will have on public display ... an additional 14 parties to our entity list. Thirteen of these parties are commercial parties - nine in Russia, three in Germany, and one in Switzerland - and one is a government research institute."

According to the official, the 14 entities are involved in biological and chemical agents production.

The official declined to reveal the names of the designated individuals, but pointed out the list includes people that have been mentioned by Navalny supporters.

The imposition of today's sanctions is only the first step the United States prepares to take in response to the alleged poisoning of Navalny, the official said.

"We have requested new or declassified intelligence community assessments in four areas, and plan to respond to each of them in the coming weeks. Today is the first-step response, and there will be more to come," the official said.

The sanctions include personal, trade and visa restrictions.

The official noted that the United States believes the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) used a nerve agent to poison Navalny in August last year.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said in December that a preliminary investigation was opened, but an actual investigation could not be launched amid the lack of substantiating materials while the Western countries ignored Russia's requests for aid on the case.

In January, Navalny returned to Russia from Germany, where he was treated for the alleged poisoning, and was arrested upon arrival at Moscow's Sheremetyevo International Airport. Shortly after, a Moscow court rescinded Navalny's suspended sentence in the 2014 Yves Rocher fraud case over multiple probation breaches and replaced it with a three-and-a-half-year prison term.

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WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) – Passenger loads went from bad to worse from December to January, with planes carrying 72 percent fewer people than in January 2019, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) said on Tuesday.

"Total demand in January 2021 (measured in revenue passenger kilometers or RPKs) was down 72.0% compared to January 2019. That was worse than the 69.7% year-over-year decline recorded in December 2020," IATA said in a press release.

The decline comes amid the emergence of new coronavirus variants that are prompting some governments to increase travel restrictions, even as vaccine programs expand, IATA said. The uncertainty around how long these restrictions will last also appears to be impacting plans for future travel, IATA added.

For example, forward bookings in January for the upcoming summer travel season were 78 percent below levels in January 2019, according to IATA.

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#### US Sanctions Over Navalny Include Personal, Trade, Visa Restrictions – Senior US Official

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) – US sanction against Russia over Alexey Navalny include personal, trade and visa restrictions, a senior administration official told reporters on Tuesday. "These actions include sanctions designations on individuals and entities as well as export restrictions and visa restrictions," the official said during a telephonic press briefing.

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#### US Believes FSB Used Nerve Agent to Poison Navalny - Senior Administration Official

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - Washington believes that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) used a nerve agent to poison opposition figure Alexey Navalny in August, a senior administration official said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"The United States believes that the Federal Security Service or FSB used a nerve agent to poison Navalny," the official said. "Sadly, this is not the first time we wouldn't witness such disgraceful and unacceptable behavior from the Russian government, as we saw in March 2018 with the attack on intelligence officer Sergei Skripal and his daughter."

Russia has denied US accusations of involvement in Navalny's alleged poisoning.

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US Seeks Stability, Predictability in Areas of Constructive Work With Russia – Sr Official

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) – The United States is seeking stability and predictability in certain aspects of its relationship with Russia, a senior administration official told reporters on Tuesday.

"We are seeking stability and predictability in areas of constructive work with Russia where it is in our interest to do that," the official said during a telephonic press briefing.

Washington is also prepared for a challenging relationship with Moscow, the official added.

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US Sanctions 14 Entities Over Navalny for Producing Biological, Chemical Agents - Official

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - The United States as part of its response to the alleged poisoning of Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny is imposing sanctions on 14 entities involved in biological and chemical agents production, a senior administration official said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"Later today, we will have on public display ...an additional 14 parties to our entity list. Thirteen of these parties are commercial parties - nine in Russia, three in Germany, and one in Switzerland - and one is a government research institute," the official said. "These parties are all involved in various aspects of biological agents production and chemical production."

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Navalny Sanctions First Step, More Steps Against Russia to Follow Soon – Sr. US Official



WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) – The United States is imposing sanctions against Russia over Alexey Navalny as only a first step, with more actions to follow in the coming week, senior administration official told reporters on Tuesday.

"We have requested new or declassified intelligence community assessments in four areas, and plan to respond to each of them in the coming weeks. Today is the first-step response, and there will be more to come," the official said.

He declined to reveal the names of the designated individuals, but mentioned that the list does include people mentioned by Navalny supporters.

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#### **US Imposing Sanctions on 7 Russian Officials Over Navalny Case - Senior Official**

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department is imposing sanctions on seven senior members of the Russian government over the case of opposition figure Alexey Navalny, a senior administration official said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"Today, as part of a robust inter-agency response to the poisoning and imprisonment of opposition figure Alexey Navalny, the Treasury Department is designating seven senior members of the Russian government," the official told reporters.

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#### **Biden to Announce That Merck & Co Will Help Produce Johnson & Johnson Vaccine - Reports**

WASHINGTON, March 2 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Tuesday will announce that pharmaceutical giant Merck & Co. will help produce Johnson & Johnson's single-shot coronavirus vaccine, a move that could dramatically increase the supply of vaccines, the Washington Post reported on Tuesday, citing senior administration officials.

Under the arrangement Merck, a fierce competitor of Johnson & Johnson, will dedicate two of its facilities in the US to producing the vaccines, the report said.

The agreement could potentially double the amount of vaccines that Johnson & Johnson would be able to make on its own, the report added.

Merck, one of the world's largest vaccine makers, had tried to produce a vaccine of its own but failed.

On Saturday, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced that it had given emergency use authorization to Johnson & Johnson's single-shot vaccine. The vaccine was the third candidate to be given FDA approval, following authorization for vaccines produced by Pfizer and Moderna.